

INTRODUCTION

WALTER LOWRIE was ninety-one years old when he died at Princeton Hospital on August 12, 1959, the recent translator of twelve works of Kierkegaard, author of this *Short Life* and of its more than six-hundred-page predecessor. Although Lowrie's engagement with Kierkegaard had begun earlier in the century, it is staggering to realize that it was not until he had reached the age of sixty-four that he began studying Danish with a view to translation. The energy and enthusiasm with which he plunged into this enormously influential undertaking is still tangible in the retrospective essay accompanying this reissue of the *Short Life*. The reissue itself, apart from providing a welcome opportunity to renew our appreciation of Lowrie, also offers a chance to look at the motivation behind such prodigious effort and at its effect on the ways in which the English-speaking world has taken, or not taken, to Kierkegaard.

For a present generation of scholars young enough to have been directed to the sometimes forbidding, fearsomely annotated, but formidably "established" Hong translations, the fact that the Danish thinker's name was hardly known in Anglophone circles in the 1940s may be hard to believe. For my own generation it was through the eminently readable renderings by Alexander Dru, David F. Swenson, and Walter Lowrie that we first met Kierkegaard, so to speak, face to face. As with many others still today, my first contact was with *Fear and Trembling*, the book Kierkegaard believed would make him famous. Although Lowrie modestly describes his translations as more "literal" than "literary," I think most readers will agree that the latter is largely false, while on the other hand many will have discovered that the former is not always true. To me, with its iconic narrative and the stark alternatives drawn from it, *Fear and Trembling* came through loud and clear, the louder and clearer for not being read through a now ever-thickening prism of textual

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commentary and explanation. From that provocative beginning it was natural to proceed to the invitingly entitled *Either/Or*, a translation left unfinished by David Swenson and completed by Lowrie. Still energized, I proceeded, though at times flaggingly, through the outwardly ramshackle and seemingly endlessly concluding *Postscript*, this being Lowrie's completion of yet another unfinished Swenson translation. That work, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript: A Mimic-Pathetic-Dialectic Composition, An Existential Contribution*, had already appeared in 1941, and by this time the firm "Swenson and Lowrie" had all but become synonymous with at least the first part of its long title. Packing in, as it does, most of Kierkegaard's thought up to the time it was written, Swenson and Lowrie's *Postscript* became the Anglophone Kierkegaard scholar's bible, just as Lowrie's *Kierkegaard* from 1938 was the original source of all those iconic anecdotes that were the stock-in-trade of the Kierkegaard *cognoscenti*: the strict father who as a child had cursed God, the rebellious young man, the broken engagement, the spat with *The Corsair*, the all-out attack on the church, the terminal sickness when his money had just run out.

There are by now several English-language biographies of Kierkegaard. None, however, shows the near devotional respect for its subject that we find in Lowrie's *Kierkegaard*. Nor does *A Short Life* contain any noticeable revision in this respect, its brevity made possible, as Lowrie explains in the essay, because there was no longer "a necessity for such abundant quotation." In what is generally taken to be an antidote to Lowrie's glowing portrayal, Josiah Thompson has portrayed Kierkegaard, with considerable scenic skill, as a somewhat elusive anti-hero.¹ Thompson, an academic with literary rather than theological interests who later wrote on the Kennedy assassination before turning his talents to private detection in San Francisco, presents Kierkegaard as an intriguing but shadowy figure, furtive even, and with few redeeming

¹ Josiah Thompson, *Kierkegaard* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973).

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features beyond those prized by literary theorists. Another biographer, Danish, has more recently made his fellow countryman into a figure we might just meet, if fleetingly, on Copenhagen's streets, imagine in the night behind his glowing apartment window, or even hear speaking to one of his few friends.² In spite of his theological background, Joakim Garff tones down even to the point of ignoring those aspects from which Lowrie extracts what his English-speaking readers came to understand as Kierkegaard's "message." In yet another biography, my own, and no doubt typically of the foreigner whose cultural genes, or memes, are from another place, the man is seen first of all through his published works and *Nachlass*, and thus as a thinking writer. The biography attempts a narrative of what drove Kierkegaard to write the books he did and in such a way as to give them *their* life history.³

Walter Lowrie's biographies are sometimes described as hagiography. What truth there is in this can be left to his readers. But it is as well to sketch in those features of Lowrie's own life that would lead one to expect a fairly saintly portrait from his hand. If there has been a tendency in some quarters, and particularly in the United States, to canonize Kierkegaard, something that a fair knowledge of what Kierkegaard wrote about himself tells us is misguided, then some of the blame must indeed be placed on Lowrie. Not that saintliness is out of the question; it is well known that Ludwig Wittgenstein found some. But the latter's background and atheistic leanings lead one to suppose that he saw it in some quality other than the staunch upholding of Christian faith. In a Faroese novel (translated as *The Lost Musicians*) Kierkegaard is described as the "tragic satan," one who, by attacking reason with its own weapons and then turning them mercilessly on himself, upstages even Mephistophe-

² Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).

³ Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard, A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

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les.⁴ In general, we should probably accept as a twofold truth that Kierkegaard was a complex person as well as a complex writer, and that a biography cannot help but be to some extent a reflection of the biographer's own background. When a good portrait painter chooses the sitter for the portrait he or she is about to paint, the attraction that led to that choice is almost certain to be visible in the result.

Lowrie, and we might well call him a man of his time, could have overlapped Kierkegaard had not the latter died an early death at forty-two just thirteen years before Lowrie was born on April 26, 1868, the son of a clergyman. He attended Lawrenceville School in New Jersey and then, in the fall of 1886, entered the freshman class at Princeton College. On graduating in 1890 he continued to Princeton Theological Seminary, taking a master's degree in divinity in 1893. Between then and 1899, between assorted clerical positions including several years as summer minister in New York State, Lowrie spent three periods of study abroad, which took him to Germany, Switzerland, and Italy. Rome was on the last two itineraries, and it was there, after further study at Princeton and some pastoral work elsewhere, that he was to settle for twenty-three years as rector of St. Paul's American Church in Rome. Appointed in 1907 at the age of thirty-nine, he remained in that post until he was sixty-two, at which point "having lived, off and on, for twenty-seven years on the Continent of Europe," he returned home, in his own words, as "a superannuated clergyman."⁵

From Lowrie's first real encounter with Kierkegaard, through the Swiss theologian Karl Barth, to the completion of his Kierkegaard saga—the working part, so to speak, for

⁴ William Heinesen, *De fortælle Spillemand* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1965), p. 144.

⁵ From "How Kierkegaard Got into English," published here. Quotations from Lowrie *not* signaled as from this source or another are from the preface and the introduction to his *Kierkegaard* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), much of which the essay recapitulates.

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those interested in Kierkegaard—the reader is referred here to Lowrie’s own account in “How Kierkegaard Got into English.” In his own characteristically unforced style we read there of the varied results of an extended tour in 1933–34 to China and Japan, where as the introduction to the earlier *Kierkegaard* had put it: “China is not inclined to attach any importance to subjects which have not yet emerged in America,” while the Japanese demonstrated to him their “just pride” in “learning also from the continent of Europe.” We read also how, once back home, Lowrie set about removing the root cause of Chinese disinterest in Kierkegaard. Now studying Danish in earnest, he began work on the extensive biography that appeared five years later, and also on the first translations, the first of which appeared in 1939 and the twelfth, and last, only five years later.

Lowrie begins by noting the initiative taken by Charles Williams (1886–1945) at Oxford University Press. What he doesn’t mention is that Williams was a poet, novelist, theologian, and literary critic, and also a member of the Inklings, that group of literary enthusiasts that included J.R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and Owen Barfield. Kierkegaard had come to Williams’s attention as a religious writer with qualities congenial to the group’s dedication to literary forms, and in particular fantasy, as ways of mediating aspects of life that philosophy failed to embrace. Williams had persuaded Alexander Dru to translate selections from Kierkegaard’s journals, then quite unknown to an English-speaking reading public. As Lowrie says, “While Dru held the door open I walked in.” Dru’s *The Journals of Kierkegaard 1834–1855* appeared in 1938, the same year as Lowrie’s biography, both of them published from Oxford University Press’s New York office, as were Lowrie’s first translations.

Lowrie lists the first English translations in the order in which Kierkegaard produced them, but the order of translation reveals his mission more clearly. The earliest were (in 1939) *Christian Discourses* and *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*; then (in 1940) *The Present Age* and *Two Minor Ethico-*

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Religious Treatises, and *Stages on Life's Way*; then (in 1941) *Training in Christianity*, *For Self-Examination* and *Judge For Yourself*, *Repetition*, *Fear and Trembling*, *The Sickness Unto Death*, and the completion of Swenson's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*; and finally (in 1944) *The Concept of Dread*, *Either/Or*, and *Attack upon "Christendom" 1854–1855*.

Lowrie's speed was in contrast to the painfully slow progress made by David Ferdinand Swenson, the first to bring Kierkegaard to the notice of Americans, though in very small numbers. Only a handful of academics will have come across Swenson's "The Anti-Intellectualism of Kierkegaard" in the 1916 volume of the *Philosophical Review*. To the frustration of those seeking further enlightenment, Swenson's articles were "hidden away in the back numbers of specialist reviews." The contrast was reflected in the styles of their engagement. For Swenson it was first of all a private affair, and although Lowrie says that what drew him to Kierkegaard was "the presentiment that what he had to say was what I personally was in need of," there was also this more immediate urge to make Kierkegaard known. In a foreword to the Swenson and Lowrie *Postscript*, Lillian Marvin Swenson describes how the chance discovery of the Danish text by her husband, then "a young graduate student in philosophy not wholly oriented in his thought," had "marked a crisis in his intellectual and spiritual development," and says that for the rest of his life Swenson remained "saturated" in Kierkegaard's thought. Anxious not to let Kierkegaard's style invade his renderings, he was a slow translator: "For many years," says his wife and by now widow, "his was a lone voice crying in the wilderness, for though Kierkegaard's works had long been known in Germany and France, even his name was practically unknown to English-speaking people." But then,

some eight years ago Dr. Walter Lowrie of Princeton, burning with a dynamic enthusiasm for the Kierkegaard literature, returned to this country, and began his crusade for an English edition of Kierkegaard's works. Under this stimulus, and encour-

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aged by the co-operation of one more aggressively active than himself, Mr. Swenson completed his translation of *Philosophical Fragments*, and then took up in earnest the translation of the *Postscript*.⁶

Unfortunately, Swenson, who had taught at Minnesota throughout the 1920s and 1930s, was unable through illness to complete the task. Eight years Lowrie's junior, he died in 1940.

Lowrie's dynamism spills over into his characteristically informal prefaces and introductions, the easy, not to say companionable, style of which happily infects both the essay published here and the *Short Life*. In "How Kierkegaard Got into English" he quotes Mrs. Swenson saying that he was more "aggressive" than her husband and, without taking offense, concedes that "in the proper sense of the word" he might be called that. He then tells a story in which he introduces the notion of providence, to Lowrie's unstrained dealings with which we shall return.

The easy familiarity with which not only his readers are treated, but also his subject, deserves our attention. Lowrie's constant reference to "S.K.," a practice that endures to this day in Kierkegaard circles, might have been a way of resolving difficulties of pronunciation or just a convenient abbreviation. Neither seems enough, nor both in combination; these two conveniences are more obviously byproducts of the special rapport that Lowrie feels with Kierkegaard, a rapport so close that it almost seems as though Kierkegaard had found *him*. To use a profane parallel, there is some hint in Lowrie's "S.K." of the satisfaction of a regional representative promoting a foreign import. Indeed Lowrie describes himself as a "promoter" and seems not averse to some association with "traveling salesmen." But there is something more: a familiarity not just with the goods but with the manufacturer.

⁶ *Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1941), pp. vii–viii.

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In the closing pages of *The Point of View for My Work as Author* Kierkegaard quotes a hypothetical “poet” whose words more or less summarize the account Kierkegaard has just given there of his suffering and of the role played by providence in its productive exploitation. The point of the lyrical version seems to be that it comes from someone abstracted from a society that condemns and ridicules Kierkegaard, someone therefore better able to see that he had “completed the task of reflection—that of casting Christianity, becoming a Christian, wholly and fully into reflection.”⁷ Lowrie, apparently aware that readers may suspect him of assuming that poet’s role, says:

I am not deluded by the notion that I might faintly resemble such a figure. But S.K. also spoke of the time when “my lover” will come—and the reader will easily discern that this book is written by a lover.

In *Works of Love*, first translated by David Swenson and Lillian Marvin Swenson (1946), love is said to bring out a person’s positive sides and give conciliatory explanations of whatever sins may be visible. It can be true of biography: lives presented by aficionados are inevitably seen through rose-tinted glasses. But then why should they not be? What life is seen as it is, or was, through plain glass? What one biographer sees escapes the eagle eye of another. In dealing with the ghost still haunting the streets of Copenhagen, on which he continues to be portrayed in *The Corsair’s* caricature and one suspects not only for the sake of tourists, Garff makes no attempt to elicit affection. He does however raise questions of honesty and even mental stability, questions that a lover who knows Kierkegaard first through his texts and a suitable selection from the journals may see little or no reason to raise, to say nothing of other closer-to-home matters true of most lives and lifetimes: envy, jealousy, even sexual repression.

⁷ *The Point of View*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 97.

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How far a biographer can go in this direction without loss of perspective is a matter of judgment and taste, but the choice is there just as motivations differ. According to Garff, his biography too is a labor of love, but not so much for his subject as for the opportunity to bring the writer behind the writings to account at last, and the opportunity to put the life into eminently readable words. With the evidence at his fingertips Garff can offer a vast palette of facts, hints, and conjectures out of which readers may piece together their own likenesses of a Kierkegaard living a life in something like the way we all do, bringing him to heel, as it were. There is a certain kind of familiarity in that too. Its nature is indicated by the Danish title's use of Kierkegaard's initials, this time in full, "SAK," hinting at the Danish *sik-sak* (zig-zag) and *saks* (scissors). The result is a far cry from the candidate for canonization that in some quarters emerged from Lowrie's "S.K."

Lowrie admits that "getting to know" Kierkegaard was impossible from the texts alone. For that he needed the journals and papers. To some, however, the texts themselves proved difficult enough. A sociologist asked to review *The Concept of Dread* was left "puzzled."⁸ On seeking some guidance and finding the copies of Lowrie's *Kierkegaard* on loan, for background he resorted to E. L. Allen's *Kierkegaard, His Life and Thought*.⁹ Allen, however, had been unable to place Kierkegaard's polemic in the wider development of modern European culture. In comparing Kierkegaard with his most enduring Danish theological opponent, N.F.S. Grundtvig, Allen came out in favor of the latter. His conclusion was that Kierkegaard had no real understanding of the wider issues and polemics to which his works might be thought to contribute. In the essay Lowrie refers to both Allen and John A. Bain as having written "their little books" in an "incredibly

⁸ Ellsworth Faris, "Review of *The Concept of Dread* by Søren Kierkegaard," *American Journal of Sociology* 50 (1945): 401-4.

⁹ E. L. Allen, *Kierkegaard, His Life and Thought* (London: Stanley Watt, 1935).

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short time” but then having “washed their hands of Kierkegaard.” Whatever assistance or otherwise the reviewer received from Allen, the result demonstrated how easy it was in 1940 to caricature the thought—as easy as it had been in the 1840s for *The Corsair* to caricature the person.

The enthusiastic Kierkegaardians of our day do not, obviously, base their allegiance on [the] teachings of the master. Among the acceptable doctrines which appeal to our contemporaries are: original sin, the supremacy of faith over reason, and the value of “existential truth.” [Kierkegaard’s] “teleological suspension of the ethical” receives less emphasis. In this “moral form of evil” faith takes precedence over the ethical. Abraham knew it was wrong to sacrifice Isaac, but he was willing to do it if God said so. This revelation seems to have come to our author after he had done wrong to the woman to whom he had been pledged.¹⁰

With the extensive background available today, both in the chronologically ordered translation of *Kierkegaard’s Journals and Notebooks* and with the historical information available in informative works such as Kirmmse’s *Encounters*,¹¹ distortion of this kind should be a thing of the past.

Whether the reviewer would show a better grasp and more appreciation with the benefit of Lowrie’s positive portrait is hard to say. Lowrie’s promotional zeal might put off those who did not share his belief in Kierkegaard. Lowrie himself admits that “a great many persons, especially in America, if they were to become acquainted with S.K., would indignantly reject him.” But the example does point to a problem that time deepens rather than resolves. Translation means both displacement and transplantation. The reviewer Ellsworth Faris plausibly suggests that interest in Kierkegaard in the early 1940s was part of a “current reaction against the scientific method and all it implies.” In some places that is no

¹⁰ Faris, *ibid.*

¹¹ Bruce H. Kirmmse, ed., *Encounters with Kierkegaard: A Life as Seen by His Contemporaries*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse and Virginia R. Laursen (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

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doubt true also today. Scientism, however, was not Kierkegaard's own target. His concern was with matters that occupy people in an open confrontation with life, matters wrongly assumed to be in the hands of the masters of metaphysics and theology. Kierkegaard was wary of scientists, but science itself was something he held in considerable respect, though typically enough mocking popular expectations.¹² Lowrie was the first to tell us that in his university entrance examination, besides philosophy, Kierkegaard passed in both mathematics and physics with the highest distinction.¹³ We have *The Concept of Dread's* clear restrictions on what psychology can say in the context of "spirit," but what Kierkegaard's attitude to sociology would be is harder to guess. In any case, a better formula for his critical engagement than "the supremacy of faith over reason" would be "the primacy of the engaged first-personal point of view."

Lowrie's campaign was fueled by fear of an English-language repetition of the German and French receptions. Knowing from his European experience how selective translation had favored the secular readings for which Kierkegaard's compatriot Georg Brandes had prepared the way, Lowrie's first translations, as we saw, were from Kierkegaard's decidedly religious post-*Postscript* writings. *Either/Or*, along with its "Seducer's Diary," came at the end. As he admits, Lowrie's plan at first had been to translate no more than *The Point of View*, along with two religious works from the same late period. He accepts Kierkegaard's account in the former of his own authorship without demur, and some will say he fails to penetrate to the reason for Kierkegaard's withholding of this work from publication until after his death, that the book itself was part of a continuing struggle to measure up to the implications of its invocation of divine

¹² *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappeleørn et al. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007–), vol. 4, NB:76. "[Y]ear after year, something that once caused astonishment becomes commonplace."

¹³ Walter Lowrie, *Kierkegaard* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 67.

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assistance. Lowrie, who is prone to invoke providence openly and more casually than Kierkegaard, seems impervious to such scruples. In general he writes as if he and Kierkegaard both shared a “result” that Kierkegaard kept under his hat only so that readers less perceptive than Lowrie could come to the same result on their own. Lowrie has no such Socratic plans for his own readers, and we find, in his enthusiastic vocational exercise, little reflection on Kierkegaard’s Socratic side, little hint of the impression a reader may receive of a latter-day Socrates who was his own Meno.

Readers today are in a better position to know where Lowrie himself stands, and consequently, if they follow him, where they stand. They can see why some claim that the Kierkegaard emerging from Lowrie’s eminently readable translations is scarcely distinguishable from an “orthodox Christian believer.”¹⁴ Those who have embraced Kierkegaard as a resource for renewal *within* the established church and have heard of his wish not to receive the sacraments from the hands of a cleric¹⁵ may ask themselves whether an ordained minister is the right person to restore him, figuratively speaking, to life.

Lowrie is aware of the problem. He admits having had to shake off the limitation of being a parson, one of Kierkegaard’s two most savaged targets, luckily escaping the other through not having become a university “don.” Here too we should perhaps take account of time. The Kierkegaard who changed the young David Swenson’s life, and whose works Walter Lowrie D.D. felt could speak to his personal needs, sounds quite unlike the Kierkegaard who said very little to his contemporaries’ taste, contemporaries who resented the dismissal of their faith as a sham and their preachers as theatrical showmen. And who knows? Today Kierkegaard might

¹⁴ See Roger Poole, “The Unknown Kierkegaard: Twentieth-century Receptions,” in Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 59.

¹⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals: A Selection*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin Books, 1996), pp. 654–55.

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have found it more important to question militant atheists about the sincerity of their *dis*belief. Starting a new campaign against congregational interference with individual faith might seem the wrong way to go when so many individuals have stopped being congregational.

We can assume one thing: that Kierkegaard, who, having seen things from “the very core of Christianity,”¹⁶ refused the last rites, would not allow that his scruples in this matter were better appreciated by “followers” who found it expedient to phase out the Christian frame than by those who held it fast. In view of the situation in Europe at the time it might occur to him that Walter Lowrie’s arrival on the scene was most opportune. It might even have struck him that providence had a hand in it. He would be more likely than Lowrie to keep that to himself.

Lowrie, who is more “upfront” than Kierkegaard in all respects, is also open and lyrical enough in his writing for us to consider his biography in the light of what Kierkegaard would call “the poetic”—perhaps not sufficiently so to have become that hypothetical poet whom Kierkegaard spoke both for and of, but, and to the pleasure of his readers, enough to qualify Lowrie as his own poet.

A Short Life says as much about Lowrie himself indirectly as the accompanying essay says about his historical mission directly. We should be grateful for this welcome renewal of *their* lives, very appropriately occasioned by the two-hundredth anniversary of the beginning of Kierkegaard’s own.

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¹⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals: A Selection*, p. 654.